

Meeting Community Food Insecurity with Local Food: NCDA Awards Grants to NC Food Hub Collaborative Members

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The COVID pandemic laid bare the vulnerabilities of our food system – grocery stores shelves were running low; the demand at food pantries grew to levels previously not seen; and at the same time, many small local farmers were unable to harvest or sell crops because so many of their traditional markets, like restaurants and schools, were closed. While there were several national emergency responses, particularly around food insecurity, in North Carolina, our local food hubs took a leading role in addressing their communities' food insecurity challenges.

Food hubs are often overlooked in our food system and remain relatively unknown. Traditionally, food hubs aggregate local produce and food products to sell or market to wholesale, retail or institutional markets. In North Carolina, several long-established, mostly rural food hubs came together soon after the pandemic struck to establish the NC Food Hub Collaborative (<https://www.ncfoodhubs.org/>). What makes NC Food Hub Collaborative members important to our state is that they are committed to building strong, local food economies; fair and equitable prices across the food chain – from the local farmers they support to the consumers they reach; and food accessibility regardless of means.

Several members of the NC Food Hub Collaborative were awarded funding from the NC Department of Agriculture COVID-19 relief grant program for “Farmers Market Operators and Local Food Hubs.” NC food hubs are deeply rooted in the communities they serve, with strong ties to local growers and community entities that regularly feed those in need, including churches, food pantries, and community- and other faith-based organizations. Utilizing funding from NCDA and other philanthropic support, NC food hubs developed a local food value chain that paid fair-market value to local farmers and producers; aggregated healthy, local produce, meat and value-added products; and worked with local faith-based and other food relief agencies to identify and distribute food to those most in need. In total, NC Food Hub Collaborative members supported 270 small, local farmers throughout the pandemic with nearly \$1.5 million in local food purchases. 41% of these farmers were women and/or socially disadvantaged farmers. Grants were made to several food hubs, including:

Feast Down East

Burgaw, NC / Pender County / <https://www.feastdowneast.org/>

During the COVID pandemic, Feast Down East utilized their Mobile Market to distribute food regionally across 9 sites, including 2 senior living facilities, a Boys & Girls Club, a Communities in Schools after school site, and 5 public housing complexes. The mobile market sells locally sourced foods from 30+ local farmers and regularly averages ~50% customers that use SNAP/EBT for payment.



Foothills Food Hub (McDowell Local Food Advisory Council)

Marion, NC / McDowell County / <https://foothillsfoodhub.org/>

Foothills Food Hub partners with faith groups, food pantries, nonprofits, health care providers, community gardeners, farmers, and low-income volunteers to distribute fresh produce, hot meals, and food boxes to families on a regular basis. During the COVID pandemic, the Foothills Food Hub distributed close to 1½ million pounds of food and helped feed more than 35,000 households.



High Country Food Hub (Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture)

Boone, NC / Watauga County / <https://www.highcountryfoodhub.org/>



In addition to an active online market with hundreds of food products, High Country Food Hub distributes local food for those in need in partnership with the Hunger and Health Coalition, a county-wide effort to address food insecurity, as well as their own faith partnerships. They recently launched a satellite pick-up system, which includes staff, cold storage, and delivery capacity to connect local food boxes with more remote people and community organizations. In 2020, the Food Hub facilitated over \$865,000 in sales for local food producers and connected with 1,353 new customers.

Men & Women United for Youth and Families

Delco, NC / Columbus County /

<https://www.menandwomenunited.org/>

The MWUYF food hub is only one subset of a broad range of community development and social services the organization provides, including workforce development, case management, and family and juvenile services. Their long-established youth program actively participates in their food hub, which distributed produce from local minority farmers through their own food pantry, active church partnerships, and a local Head Start.



Sandhills AgInnovation Center

Ellerbe, NC / Richmond County / <https://www.sandhillsag.com/>

Sandhills AgInnovation connects local farmers to new markets and resources. During the pandemic, SAIC actively built partnerships with area churches, including a coalition of United Methodist Churches and the General Baptist North Carolina State Convention, to extend local food distribution to those in need. In addition, SAIC is partnering with area senior living facilities and will begin delivering produce boxes at varied sites next year; and has an active partnership with African American communities for food distribution.



TRACTOR Food & Farms

Burnsville, NC / Yancey County / <https://tractorfoodandfarms.com/>



TRACTOR supports local agriculture through direct local markets and partnerships with over 30 food relief and health agencies across Western North Carolina, as well as operating their own regional food assistance programs. In 2020, the TRACTOR facility hosted three partner organizations also working in food insecurity, including a health partnership, a food pantry and

a community garden; together they distributed 500,000+ pounds of emergency food and packed and distributed over 10,000 food shares to individuals affected by the COVID pandemic.

Working Landscapes

Warrenton, NC / Warren County / <https://workinglandscapesnc.org/>

Working Landscapes is NC's only food hub that focuses on value-added production (e.g., fresh cut vegetables and prepared meals). During the COVID pandemic, they supplied and built a "community freezer" to enable greater fresh food distribution; distributed locally-sourced food boxes through partnerships with their local food pantry, community nonprofits and the Haliwa-Saponi Tribe; and partnered with a local restaurant to prepare senior meals using locally-sourced meat and produce.

